

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 36

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
18 April 1979

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ORGISALT

Scarecrows in the SALT patch

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WASHINGTON—Even as Soviet and U.S. negotiators struggle to resolve the last few nitty-gritty details of a new strategic arms limitations treaty, opponents continue dribbling out persuasive reasons, some based on highly secret intelligence data, why the U.S. Senate should reject a SALT-2 treaty.

Every day, it seems, comes a new revelation aimed at convincing Americans that SALT-2 is not in the U.S. interest, either because it somehow gives undue advantage to the Soviets or that it is too restrictive to enable the United States to take advantage of its technological edge or that the limitations on nuclear weapons delivery systems cannot be adequately verified, thus opening the door for massive cheating by the Russians. The latest series of leaked disclosures have to do with verification, a touchy issue since the upheaval in Iran deprived the United States of two key electronic listening posts on the Soviet border overlooking the Baikonur missile testing center at Leninsk.

Within an hour after CIA Director Stansfield Turner told the Senate Intelligence Committee in closed-door testimony that it would take the United States until 1984 to fully restore the capability for monitoring Soviet missile tests that was lost with the closure of the two Iranian listening posts, some of the senators who oppose SALT-2 were privately spreading Turner's assessment as evidence that the United States had a serious, if not fatal, verification problem. High administration sources, while confirming that it would take until 1983 or 1984 to fully replace the monitoring capability lost in Iran, strongly denied that this posed a serious SALT-2 verification problem.

As far as SALT-2 verification issues—such as the number of Soviet missiles, the number of warheads on each missile and the general missile characteristics—they can be adequately covered by U-2 flights along the Soviet border, one official said. But there were other monitoring capabilities lost, quite apart from SALT-2, that will take much longer to replace, the official said, such as Soviet countdown techniques, how fast the missile comes off the pad and other extremely useful technological data. In order to regain that monitoring capability, a new sophisticated spy satellite must be designed, built and placed in stationary orbit above the test site, he said.

Another leak, published yesterday by Aviation Week and Space Technology magazine, disclosed that the Soviets are developing a system to tape record telemetry data on test missiles and parachute the tapes to earth, thus foiling U.S. electronic monitoring of their missile tests. Why should that come as a surprise, one wonders, since the United States has had that capability for many years?

Several other recent "leaks" from sources opposed to SALT-2, while related to verification, raised the same phony specter of plans for massive cheating on the part of the Soviets. One was a story that the Soviets were testing a missile with 14 nuclear warheads (multiple independently guided reentry vehicles, or Mirv). Since SALT-2 would put a

The fact is that the United States has not only tested, but has actually deployed Mirv missiles (the Poseidon and Minuteman-3) that carry up to 14 warheads. Presumably, if SALT-2 is signed and ratified by the Senate, the U.S. will remove the extra warheads and abide by the 10-warhead limitation. Ironically, the 10-warhead limitation in SALT-2 is much to United States advantage since the Soviets have more than 300 SS-18 missiles which can carry up to 40 warheads each.

Another such story "revealed" that the Soviets had recently test-fired a cruise missile from a supersonic Backfire bomber, which is not counted in the SALT-2 limits on strategic nuclear delivery systems because the Backfire is not intercontinental in range. Naturally, if SALT-2 is signed, the Backfire could not be armed with long-range cruise missiles or it would have to be counted as a strategic delivery system.

So, what's the big problem? Until there is a valid SALT-2 agreement there is no prohibition against

deploying Backfires armed with cruise missiles. Isn't that a good reason for having a SALT-2 treaty? And shouldn't the fact that United States intelligence was able to learn about the Backfire test be taken as evidence that the U.S. verification techniques are not all that bad?

The rash of bogus and misleading intelligence "leaks" by opponents of SALT-2 makes one wonder whether those who stand ready to vote against treaty ratification in the Senate are really troubled by such issues as verification and mutual balance or whether they simply are opposed to any arms limitation agreement with the Soviets at all, however fair and verifiable it might be.

President Carter, who has publicly stated that he shares these concerns, has decided to press on with SALT-2 anyway for two very important reasons. First, because he has learned that although the Soviets want a SALT-2, they will not let their desire for a treaty be linked to their behavior elsewhere. Other means, such as the President's request for increased U.S. defense expenditures, will have to be used to counter the Soviet conventional threat. But most importantly, Carter is absolutely convinced—and there is evidence that Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev shares this view—that unless the nuclear arms race is halted and the superpowers begin dismantling their dangerously large nuclear arsenals, a nuclear holocaust somewhere down the road will become almost inevitable.